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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 000169

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [KMPI](#) [BA](#) [REFORM](#) [POL](#) [REGION](#)

SUBJECT: KING PROMOTES DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION, CONTINUED

REFORM IN INTERVIEW WITH LOCAL PRESS

Classified by DCM Susan L. Ziadeh for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

11. (C) King Hamad gave an interview February 3 to the editors-in-chief of all six of Bahrain's Arabic daily newspapers. He covered democratic development and continued political reforms, including the participation of women in elections. He served notice that ministerial reshuffles would continue, saying that only "super human beings" could perform seriously as a minister for up to eight years. The King hailed the role of the press and said laws should promote press freedoms. He discussed Iran, defending that country's right to peaceful nuclear power but calling for a Gulf region free of nuclear weapons. He also talked about Bahrain's perennial housing problems. His simple declarative statements welcoming the participation of the boycotters in the political system should encourage them to take a decision to contest the parliamentary elections later this year. The King's message, however, has not deterred the Shia rejectionists: one day after the interview appeared in the press, the headline "Haq Movement" issued a petition calling for a new constitution drafted by a "fairly elected body." End Summary.

"Most Beautiful Day" in Bahrain

12. (U) King Hamad gave his first interview of the year February 3 to the editors-in-chief of all six of Bahrain's Arabic daily newspapers. It was a question-and-answer format with only a short welcome statement as an introduction. On political participation, he said, "I was thrilled to hear about their (the boycotting political societies) participation in the 2006 legislative elections because that would permit the exchange of views between all groups and would enrich the legislative experience. Participation by the boycotting societies in the elections will be one of the most beautiful days in Bahrain." He added, "During the boycott, there was a feeling that some of our sons were still waiting outside" the political system.

12. (U) Continuing on the theme of political reform, the King said that "political reforms belong to us all... and we should aspire to reach higher levels of democratic and political development." He was enthusiastic in promoting development for all of Bahrain's citizens, saying, "We want more for our daughters and sons, as we see all citizens" as equals. He added that Bahraini women are well known for their dedication, hard work and capabilities and they are in a strong position to contest elections. Addressing the doubters, the King said, "I'm amazed anyone would oppose the political empowerment of women... Whatever I say in praise of our women will not be enough."

13. (C) With regard to the government, the King said that cabinet reshuffles were necessary to achieve progress within a vibrant political environment. "The era when ministers hold onto posts for 20, 30, or 40 years is over. A minister who can perform seriously for eight years is a super human being. There are ministers who behave as if the ministries were their private property and the employees were their own. Such ministers gradually believe that the people should serve them instead of the opposite." (Comment: Recent cabinet shuffles moved out two long-standing Cabinet ministers, Minister of Foreign Affairs Shaikh Mohammed bin Mubarak Al Khalifa and Minister of Oil Shaikh Isa bin Ali Al Khalifa. It was not clear the King was targeting anyone in particular with his comments, but the remaining ministers who have been in place since the 1970s are Deputy Prime Minister/Minister of Islamic Affairs Shaikh Abdulla bin Khalid Al Khalifa and Minister of Defense Shaikh Khalifa bin Ahmed Al Khalifa, as well as Prime Minister Shaikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa.)

Press Law To Ensure Highest Level of Freedom

14. (U) The King hailed the role of the press, saying "the press helps me feel the pulse of the street and gain insight into people's concerns." In response to a question about a controversial draft press law, the King said that press laws should be highly flexible to ensure the highest levels of freedom. He added, "I believe the press helps us to realize mistakes and rectify them. We must encourage a vibrant and responsible press." In a note of caution, however, the King stated that regulations should block articles that could be detrimental to Bahrain's relations with neighboring countries. He continued, "The last thing I can think of is muzzling the press, whether there is a law or not. The real power is self-censorship and doing what is good for the country."

15. (U) Regarding Bahrain's foreign relations, the King said that Iran has the right to develop peaceful nuclear power. He continued, "What we understood from previous statements from the Iranian government is that nuclear armament is banned, and should be banned, for all without exception." He mentioned the statement from the recent GCC summit calling for a Middle East and Gulf region free of all nuclear weapons. He said that Bahrain opposes any escalation and supports negotiations based on required guarantees to promote stability in the region.

16. (U) In the statement that grabbed the headlines locally, the King said that problems in the government's housing program needed to be addressed in the next two years. "Every citizen should be able to afford to have his own land and be able to build on it and live comfortably for generations to come. This is the right of every Bahraini."

Opposition Society Welcomes King's Comments

17. (U) Leading Shia opposition society Al Wifaq issued a statement February 5 welcoming the comments of the King on full participation in the 2006 legislative elections. The statement also called on the King to implement fully his directives regarding housing and called on him to issue a work plan to ensure that every citizen owns a house or plot of land.

Comment

18. (C) The King's simple declarative statement welcoming the participation of the boycotting political societies in the political system helps to clarify the situation on the ground. As the May municipal council elections and October parliamentary elections approach, there has been a great deal of speculation about whether the King or government really want the boycotters to participate, despite their public calls for full participation. These comments should further encourage the boycotters to join the system and empower them to cite the King's own words in overcoming opposition or obstacles to a decision to participate. The King's comments, however, have not had any impact on the hardline Shia opposition. One day after the interview appeared in newspapers, the "Haq Movement" issued a petition calling for a new constitution drafted by a "fairly elected body," a disparaging reference to parliament, which the rejectionists consider to be illegitimate.

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